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MOTIVE IN CONDUCT.

"Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum."

Göthe's "Faust."

Most writers upon ethics have endeavored to prove that men do certain things and leave others undone from a single motive. This motive may be either the quest for pleasure, the love of power, the desire to accomplish what may be publicly useful, the sense of duty, or so on. Or we may simplify the problem by dividing motives into two classes, the selfish and the altruistic. The altruist feels instinctively that he is the parent of the future, whether he realizes that he is the child of the past or not. It is doubtful, however, whether the problem should be posited in such a simple form. Few men are always impelled by the same internal force. It is safe to assume that the deeds of no single day in the life of the noblest man are invariably the result of a sense of duty. There is the constant interchange of obligation, of pleasure, of habits unconsciously formed, of egoistic and altruistic feelings, and of those that may be called unmoral because they are without any ethical quality. The moral motive, that is the sense of duty, predominates only in those persons in whom the moral faculty, assuming that there is such a faculty, is highly developed. Although men always obey the strongest motive, we have no right to take for granted that man is not a free moral agent, at least within certain limits, because the motive-force is external. The incentive is usually external; but the potency of the attraction or repulsion is wholly dependent upon the mentality of him upon whom it acts. In other words, man makes the motive, or may make it, not the object. Motive may therefore be said to be subjective, not objective.

Ever since the existence of a United States Congress some of its members have taken the position that, as salaried servants or employés of their constituents, they are under obligations to hold aloof from all other business, and that they had no

right to compromise their freedom of action by forming entangling alliances with individuals or corporations in a way that might influence, or seem to influence, their votes in matters of legislation. Others, and the majority, have contended that they were at perfect liberty to serve outside interests if, in their judgment, those interests in no way interfered with the larger concerns upon which they might be called upon to legislate. The external object before the two classes was precisely the same; that they reached diametrically opposite conclusions must therefore be due solely to the subjective attitude of each class. In this matter a just decision must be based, not on metaphysical or philosophical, but on psychological grounds. The motive depends for its strength upon the mental constitution of the parties in interest. How far each person is individually responsible is a purely transcendental question. Since the external objects that determine the actions of men are still, as they have always been, substantially the same, it is evident that conduct must be regulated by bringing to bear on the psyche the right sort of influences. It is impossible to change environment to an important extent, except in isolated instances; it is generally possible to train the psyche so that environment will not produce a deleterious effect upon its decisions in matters affecting conduct. The value of a proper system of practical pedagogy thus becomes apparent.

I have for some time been trying to follow the strictly scientific method in the study of motives in conduct. I have endeavored to examine critically certain concrete cases in order to see what light could be obtained in this way on the general problem. For this purpose I have selected several persons whom I have known for a number of years and have tried to fathom their mentality, with the following results:—

Number One is a man who some twenty years ago was in the employ of a railroad company, but having been found short in his accounts about a thousand dollars, was dismissed. He spread the report that he had been robbed of this sum. One of his neighbors, feeling sorry for him, as he was not well-to-do, raised a subscription and refunded the ostensible loss. The man was next employed in two public positions successively;

but in each, year after year, the receipts fell below the expenditures. The authorities became suspicious and discharged him without taking any legal steps. The records began at once to show a different face, and people drew their own inferences. He then obtained a minor position in the office of the county treasurer. After holding the place for several years, the accounts of the office were carefully gone over by an expert and revealed a deficiency of about seventy thousand dollars. Suspicion now fastened upon the man whose reputation had become somewhat tarnished. He was arraigned, found guilty of embezzlement, and sentenced to the penitentiary, where he now is. To this day no one has been able to suggest any conscious motive for this man's singular conduct. He belongs to a reputable family. He had no bad habits, nor any domestic drain upon his income. During most of his mature years he was popular in the community, and received many marks of public favor. He was a trusted official in the church and judicious in the education of his large family. There is no explanation of his long career of crime, except that he was a natural thief and could not resist the temptation, when money passed through his hands, to appropriate some of it illegally to his own use. Much of it was still in his possession when he was convicted. The fact that he several times fell under suspicion did not serve as a warning; and detection came at last. The question of motive does not seem to enter deeply into this man's case. It was, so far as any one is able to judge, the following of a blind appetite. That he and his family persistently refuse to restore the ill-gotten gains would seem to indicate that the culprit had accomplices under his own roof. Among his bondsmen is one man who has been deprived of the savings of a lifetime and is now reduced to poverty. Yet his sad fate makes no impression upon those who are in position to restore to him the money of which he has been most unjustly stripped.

Number Two is a man somewhat prominent in business in a small town, as was his father before him. He is regarded as a good citizen and a wise counselor in financial matters. He takes no risks in his investments; and if municipal affairs

were chiefly in his hands they would be economically administered, perhaps too much so for the good of all concerned. He would not misrepresent anything he had to sell; but if it should happen to be marred by a defect which the prospective purchaser failed to notice, he would not admit that he had dealt unfairly. He is relatively liberal toward benevolent enterprises; nor is his benevolence due to motives of policy, since to give or to withhold would in no wise affect the business in which he is engaged. He prides himself on doing business in a strictly business way by asking no favors and by doing as few favors, as such, as possible. He treats his friends and relatives in matters of this sort exactly as he treats strangers. In short, he seems never to permit himself to be swayed by sentimental considerations of any kind whatsoever.

Number Three is a man of more than average intelligence, somewhat prominent in educational circles, and a leading member of an orthodox Protestant denomination. He is strictly a man of his word and punctual in the discharge of his financial obligations. He is a model of temperate living and of promptness in the discharge of his routine duties. But he lacks moral courage. While he would not be guilty of a mean act, he does not hesitate to profit by the perfidy of others. He holds that a person cannot afford to jeopardize his own interests for scruples. He is not afraid to denounce villainy in abstract terms; he is careful as to what he says about any particular villain. He would not on any account tell a falsehood, but if another person were to tell one to his profit he would not put himself to much trouble to correct it. He is one of those negatively good men in whose keeping the cause of morality makes no progress. If it were intrusted to such men mainly, it would lose ground from day to day, and the world would become worse continually. I doubt whether his motives have ever been clear to his own mind. He evidently regards righteousness as consisting in avoiding evil as much as possible, but not in resisting it, except when he meets it in a comparatively mild form.

Number Four differs considerably from the other cases here cited. He is a man who was for a number of years identified

with an important enterprise to the building up of which into comparatively large proportions he is admitted to have materially contributed. A few years ago the conditions began to have an ominous look from the moral point of view, and he voluntarily withdrew from a prominent to a subordinate position. The worst that he had feared came to pass. After waiting in vain for some time in the hope that conditions would improve, he severed his connection with the concern at a great financial sacrifice to himself. He might have held his position indefinitely, and would at worst have seemed merely to have connived at a condition of affairs over which he had no power; but he preferred to avoid even the appearance of evil, since he had all his life preached the doctrine that righteousness and morality should be aggressive. By his course he has put himself in position to denounce the wrong he could not prevent. His motive seems to have been clearly discerned, formulated and put in practice: an honest man should not condone wrong even by silence. Although he has shown no desire to pose as a hero or martyr, he felt that the principles he had all along professed demanded the sacrifice as an example to those who had been accustomed to look to him for guidance.

In the spring of 1907 the Hocking Valley was visited by the most disastrous flood in its history. The rise of the waters was so rapid that several persons were drowned and others were for many hours in deadly peril. At one point a number of houses were surrounded by the raging torrent, which threatened every moment to engulf them and their inmates. It seemed madness for any boat to attempt the rescue of the unfortunates. At length a man who had the reputation of being a skillful waterman, unable longer to resist their frantic cries, resolved to venture. Owing to an accident, his skiff was overturned and he drowned. The outlook was now more hopeless than ever. Nevertheless another man, whom I will call Number Five, undismayed by the fate of his predecessor, also resolved to attempt the difficult feat, and safely brought all those in peril to the shore, making several trips for the purpose. It was an act of genuine heroism, albeit the doer refused all public recognition, and has ever since gone on in the even tenor

of his way, attending to the management of his modest business. There was not a tinge of bravado in the act. Here seems to be a clear instance in which the performer of a highly praiseworthy deed expected to get no reward but that of self-approbation. Doubtless the prospective applause of thousands of spectators who would witness the daring deed had some influence; but it was to all appearance very slight. The hero had not even the incentive of responsibility that rests upon a man who is in a position where many lives are intrusted to his care, as is the case with a locomotive engineer or the pilot of a ship. The sight of distress may have had a strong influence. Perhaps, if asked why, he would have answered with Herbert Spencer, that he could not help it. If the moral motive is not intuitive in the race it certainly is in this man. He must be called an accident in a community, just as one member of a family may possess excellent abilities while all the rest are mediocres or less.

Number Six is a comparatively young man who during most of his life has shown a marked predilection for political power, which he preferred to get by intrigue rather than by fair and honorable methods. He does not hesitate in the least to resort to falsehood when it is likely to serve his immediate purpose. He would not shrink from a false oath so far as mental scruples are concerned, although he has been careful not to lay himself liable to the charge of perjury. Xenophon draws a portrait of this man in the following language, which I quote with some abridgment: "Menon, the Thessalian, was conspicuous for his desire to gain riches and influence, to the end that he might acquire the greater possessions, as well as for his love of power in order that he might turn it to pecuniary profit. He desired to be on good terms with those in authority in order that he might commit crime with impunity. He believed the shortest way to what he coveted to be through falsehood and perjury and deception. Straightforward and open dealing he held to be evidence of stupidity. It was plain that he had no affection for anybody; if he showed a disposition to be anyone's friend he was forthwith found to be engaged in some plot against him. If he came into contact with an individual who had no

regard for an oath, and who was by nature prone to injustice, he stood in fear of him as being a person who was well on his guard. But those who revered the gods, and who habitually told the truth, he held to be lacking in courage. Just as some persons pride themselves on their piety, their truthfulness, and their justice, so he gloried in his ability to deceive, to fabricate lies, and to hold his friends up to ridicule. The man who would hesitate to commit any act, however unjust and base, he regarded as lacking in a knowledge of human nature. He thought the best way to make sure of the fidelity of his friends was to take them into copartnership in crime. He considered it an act of beneficence, when anyone deserted him, that he did not compass his destruction when he had him in his power." It is plain that a man with such a character is not influenced by any ethical considerations whatever. Nor does there seem to be any doubt that the successful accomplishment of the basest projects gives him the feeling of self-approval. In other words, success, as subjectively judged, is the only motive that governs his conduct. Number Six is simply concerned to make his mark as a politician. His motives, like those of Menon, are money and power. While no one of his fellow-citizens places any confidence in him, some are not averse to accepting his aid to serve their own ends, or where they think it essential to the accomplishment of their own purposes. It is the oft-repeated story of comparatively honest men in negative collusion with rogues.

The most pronounced example of conventional morality is Number Seven. He has admitted to me in private conversation that he regards all religions as equally true and equally false and that he is an out-and-out materialist. He does not think it prudent to enter a saloon, but he keeps wine and beer in his house to be dealt out to select friends. He is an honest man in business, although he likes to drive sharp bargains, and sometimes boasts of his shrewdness. He came to this country from Germany at the age of fourteen, and by the time he was sixty had become a moderately rich man. While he is entirely without education, he does some independent thinking, and reads a few of the more substantial periodicals. He does not

admit that men are actuated by any other motives than those of self-interest. He is a good deal of an epicure and will shorten his earthly days by high living.

It would be interesting to ascertain just how far these seven typical men are influenced by public opinion. This is possible only by approximation, as they could not answer the question with entire truthfulness even at the confessional. There seems no doubt that Number Six cares nothing for it whatever. He boasts of his astuteness and of his indifference to what his neighbors think of him. It is probable that Number One desired to stand well with his fellowmen and hoped that his criminal course would never be discovered. Number Four is undoubtedly concerned about his reputation; he wishes to be what he seems. Deliberate public opinion, as distinguished from the frenzy of a mob, is a powerful factor, and has, ever since the time of Homer, exercised more or less influence on the promotion of morality. It is a matter of common observation that persons often conduct themselves properly where they are well known, but become immoral among strangers. It is difficult for the average man to lead an upright life in a community whose standard of morals is low. The "carpetbag régime" in the South was a practical example. But here we meet with the apparent paradox that the exceptionally strong and the abnormally weak are indifferent to what may be called reputation. There was no crime too great and no moral turpitude too base for the first Napoleon, if they promised to promote his selfish schemes. Yet in his last years, when he had leisure to reflect upon what his contemporaries thought of him, he tried to persuade himself and others that he had the good of mankind at heart; in the full swing of his active career and the high tide of his success he thought of himself alone. Socrates, whose moral nature, judged by the standard of his time, was abnormally developed, heeded public opinion so far as to conform to the popular ritual in the worship of the gods. Assuming that Xenophon has correctly portrayed him—and he can hardly have been mistaken in a matter of common knowledge—he held relatively the same views with the modern minister of the gospel who tacitly holds a creed which, in part at least, he

no longer believes, under the conviction that by so doing his power for good will be greater than if he takes an openly radical stand. In the latter case he would have to defend his own position instead of attacking the enemy. The Greek poets, in the main, held that the morals of their countrymen could be improved only by using the popular creed as a foundation. Saint Paul, like Socrates, was one of those strong characters who take their stand upon what they believe to be true and right without regard to what others may think of them. On the other hand, those who are at the bottom of the social ladder usually lead reckless lives. Every stratum of society has to some extent its own code, which those who belong to it obey within certain limits. Those who expect to ask nothing of the public, either by reason of wealth or penury, are very likely to care little about what it thinks of them. Men like Socrates and Paul are examples of what Benjamin Kidd calls "projected efficiency." They place themselves upon a moral elevation toward which their successors ascend slowly and painfully and with many back-slidings. Such an advanced stand can be taken and held only by men who have a preternaturally keen insight and a will of uncommon strength. They do not need the support and encouragement of public opinion. To the generality of mankind such a support is indispensable. It is therefore important to raise the moral level of the community. This it is impossible to do except by means of some agency that will operate beneficially on the large majority of those who constitute it, both by means of agencies of enlightenment and by providing the proper stimulus.

"Greift nur hinein ins volle Menschen leben!
Ein jeder lebts, nicht vielen ists bekannt,
Und wo ihrs packt, da ists interessant."

Faust.

CHAS. W. SUPER.

OHIO UNIVERSITY.